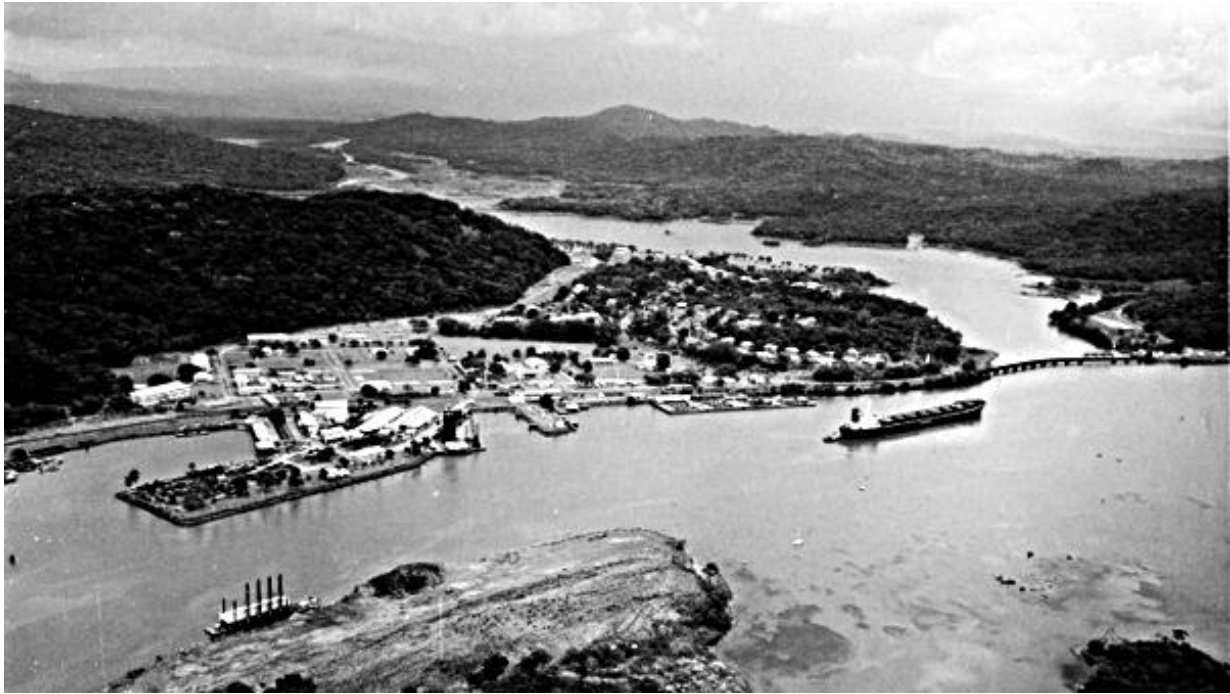


JOHN G. CLAYBOURN & GAMBOA, C.Z.

Compiled by Louie Celerier



Gamboa circa 1960. The Canal is in the forefront with ship going through close to the one-way bridge over the Chagres River. Photo from UFPCM Collection.

Introduction

Back in December of 2014, when I was writing the article on the Marstrand airplane crash with the help of Chuck Hummer, he asked me if I had in my collection a book by John G. Claybourn. I had to admit I had never heard of the man. Chuck continued to explain that he had been "the powerful chief of the Dredging Division responsible for moving the Division to Gamboa from Paraiso and building the towns of Gamboa and Santa Cruz."

Chuck added that "He traveled to Washington over the governor to get the move approved. He was known as John 'God' Claybourn by his employees. In designing the layout of the town he made it so that he could travel from his residence to his headquarters without STOP signs. He played a key role in the design and materials selection for the residences,"

Now, that is the sort of stuff that would rouse my interest and I pursued the matter further with Chuck who then sent notes to some whom he thought would have more information. These other leads did have some more comments indeed, as you shall see later in the narrative. Not being through helping me with the preliminary data, Chuck went further and provided me with the whole story on John Claybourn, as he received it from *The Claybourn Genealogical Society* making my job incredibly easier. So, I cannot claim authorship of this article as I have played only the role of manager placing all the information in a narrative format. *Louie Celerier.*

John Geronald Claybourn

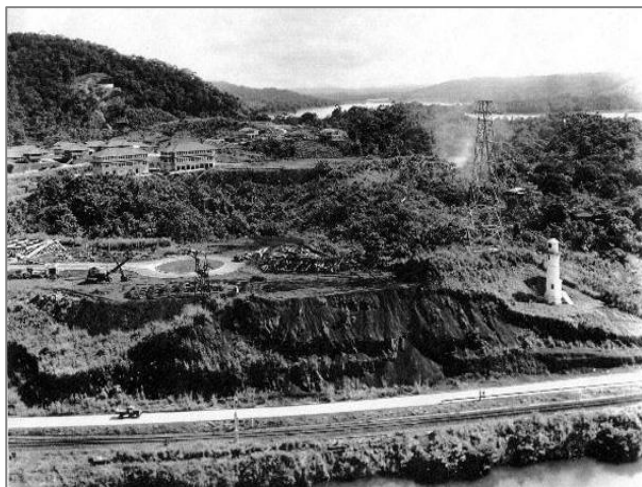
(From *The Claybourn Genealogical Society*)

John Geronald Claybourn was born on May 23, 1886, in Albert Lea, Minnesota. He attended the University of Minnesota for three years, majoring in Civil Engineering, but did not graduate. Nevertheless, starting as a "rodman" in 1910 for Isthmian Canal Commission, he rose to the powerful position of Dredging Division Superintendent, a position he held from 1921 until his retirement in 1948.



*LEFT: The Dredging Division Headquarters at Paraiso, Circa 1920s. Photo - czimages.
RIGHT: John G. Claybourn in 1921. Photo from Claybourn Genealogical Society.*

When John arrived on the Isthmus, he was following the footsteps of his uncle Ephraim Claybourn and cousin Vern Claybourn who had preceded him to the canal construction. During those first years of the canal construction days, John was promoted from rodman to levelman and then to transit man. In 1914 he was transferred to the Dredging Division and his meteoric career began when, in 1917, he was initially promoted to Junior Engineer followed by Assistant



LEFT: The new town of Gamboa being built around 1935. RIGHT: The new Dredging Division Headquarter and Facilities probably during the 1950-1960 eras. Photos from czimages.

Engineer in 1918 and, finally, Superintendent of the Division in 1921, based in Paraiso. In this capacity, Claybourn was now in charge of supervising maintenance work on the canal, clearing landslides, acquisition and maintenance of dredging equipment, construction of the town of Gamboa and planning for improvements to the canal. In this last capacity, he submitted plans for a third set of locks in the 1930s and plans to replace the canal with a parallel sea level canal in the early 1940s.

In 1924 John created the original design and layout for a new town in Gamboa, including all the facilities necessary for the Dredging Division and, for the next 12 years, argued for the move of the division from Paraiso to Gamboa. In 1934, his tenacity bore fruit and, by 1936, the Dredging Division had a new home.

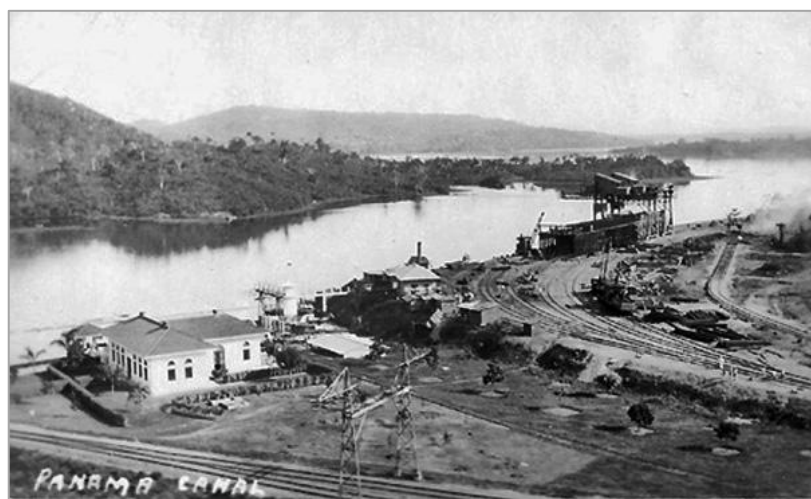
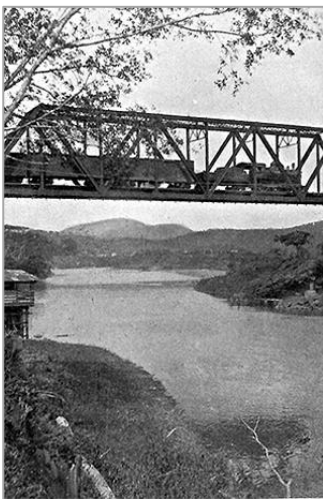
While working for the Panama Canal and after his retirement in 1948, Claybourn was involved as a consultant in many projects in different parts of the world, including Panama, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Florida, Guatemala, Venezuela and Burma.

John Claybourn married his first wife, Regina Flores, in March of 1913. They divorced around 1927 and then he married Elsie Grieser, a stenographer working for the Panama Canal, in 1928. Elsie had attained a measure of celebrity in her younger days as a long-distance swimmer and canoeist. Upon his retirement, they moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan. He died there in 1967 and Elsie died in 1983 in Alexandria, Virginia.

Gamboa

(From *The Panama Canal Review*, September 4, 1953)

Until Gamboa became the headquarters of the Dredging Division in the fall of 1936, it had, as a town, played no important part in Isthmian history. It was not even a railroad stop until 1911. Today, it is one of the most attractive communities in the Canal Zone. From its docks, dredges, cranes, barges and tugs go about their business of keeping the canal open for traffic. Its community buildings are grouped within a small area and its quarters-lined streets run up into the hills which, during the late dry season, are lined up with the brilliant yellow Guayacan or the pink and purple colors of other flowering trees.



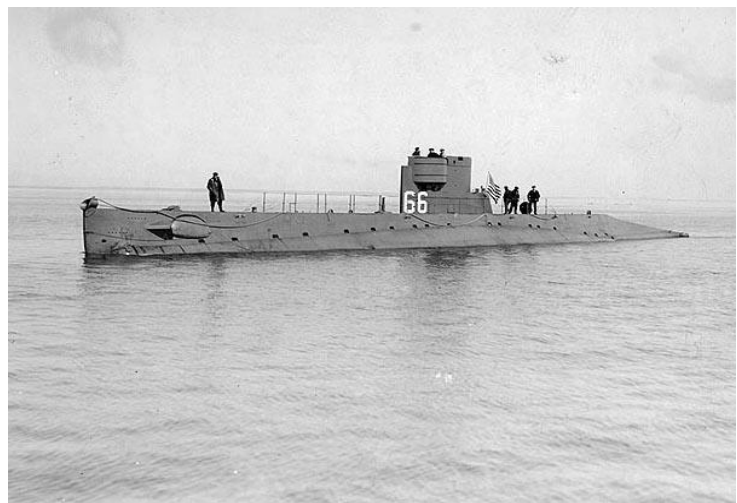
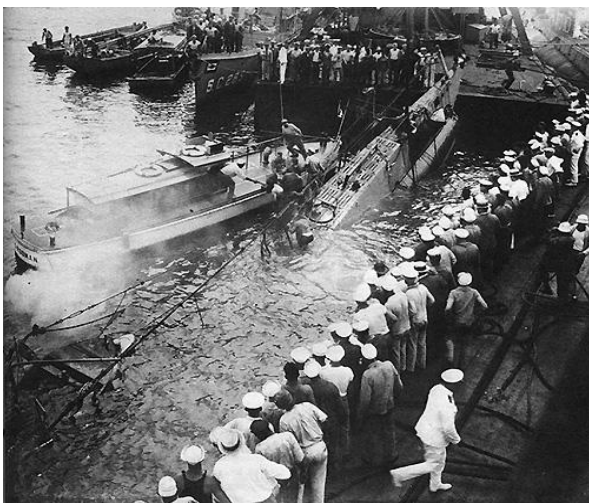
LEFT: The Panama RR bridge over the Chagres River at Gamboa prior to the filling of Gatun Lake. The train on the bridge is headed in the direction of the Gamboa Gravel Pits, shown on the photo on the LEFT, and located on the southern bank of the Chagres. Photos by czimages.

As a construction point for the Canal work, Gamboa (which means a tree of the quince family) first came into prominence when the French Canal Company began excavation. The French plans for a sea level canal called for a dam across the Chagres River at Gamboa to retain the river in a large lake while a channel, known as the east diversion, carried its waters to the Atlantic Ocean. The French built the first bridge over the Chagres at Gamboa in support of their construction efforts... It was carried away by a flood in 1890 after work by the French had come to almost a complete stand still and was not rebuilt until 1907 when the Americans began work again in earnest.

In July of 1911, the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC) approved construction of a government town site on the north side of the bridge to house the people living in the seven-mile stretch between Tabernilla and Gorgona who would be displaced by the rising waters of Gatun Lake. When finished, 203 "Silver Roll" West Indian employees and their families moved into the town. By 1914, however, the number of inhabitants at Gamboa had dropped from about 700 to 173, but it now included "Gold Roll" American employees. On the north side, where the "Gold Roll" employees were housed, there was a police station, a four-family house which had been brought from Empire, a two-family house from Culebra and a couple of box cars for bachelors. Several more box cars on the south side of the bridge housed the married and bachelor "Silver Roll" employees. The commissary, on the north side, was made up of three box cars, according to Emmett Zemer, now of the Community Services Bureau, who was Gamboa commissary manager and the town's fireman for eight months in 1916. Mr. Zemer recalls that the mosquitoes were terrific in those days and he had malaria twice during the eight months he was there.

During all this time, Dredging Division headquarters were located at Paraiso, just north of Pedro Miguel at the entrance to the Cut. That they were ever moved to Gamboa was due largely to an accident and the persistence of one man, the then Dredging Division Superintendent, John G. Claybourn.

On July 30, 1923, just two years after taking the helm of the Dredging Division, Claybourn wrote a Memo to Governor Morrow recommending that the Dredging Division shops be moved from Paraiso to Gamboa for two reasons: "First, as a safeguard in case of obstruction of the Cut by slides, the logical location being between any possible dredging and the dumps at Gatun Lake; second, increased Canal traffic, as well as the size of ships, introduces a serious menace



LEFT: October 30, 1923 - The successful salvage of the U.S. Navy submarine O-5 (USS-66) off Cristobal 31 hours after sinking. RIGHT: USS-66 (O-5) submarine on sea trials off the coast of Providence, MA, in April 1918. Photos from Internet

to our fleet when moored in the comparatively narrow confines of the Cut at Paraiso." Three months later his first argument was vividly and tragically emphasized.

On October 28, the SS *ABANGAREZ* and the submarine O-5, running on the surface, collided in Cristobal Harbor. The submarine sank. Of the 21 men on board 16 were accounted for. Five were missing and presumed still in the submarine. Working against time to save the men, salvage men sent an urgent call for one of the Dredging Division's big cranes at Paraiso. But just about that time, 300,000 cubic yards of rock from the west bank slid into the Cut blocking the path of the crane. Two behemoth dipper dredges were put to work to clear a channel for the crane and, after several hours of relentless work, a narrow passage was cleared for the big crane *AJAX* to squeeze through. It did get through and saved the lives of two men trapped in the submarine. Meanwhile two bodies were found in the bay, but the third was never found. Of the two men rescued from the submarine, one, Torpedo Mate 2 Henry Breault, was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor for risking his life to save his shipmate.

For over 12 years following his Memo to Governor Morrow, Claybourn urged successive governors to consider the transfer to Gamboa, but all balked considering the cost too high. Finally, in 1933 Governor J.L. Schley ordered a study as to the feasibility of the project and its cost. With the cost estimated at \$2,780,000, the governor gave his approval and work commenced. It was a huge project involving docks, shops, warehousing, office buildings, commissary, clubhouse, post office, fire station, train station, housing of all sorts, streets, sewers, power and telephone lines, landscaping and improving the road from Pedro Miguel. On January 13, 1936, J.F. Evans officially opened the commissary and post office. In April Gladys A. Houx became the first feminine postmaster of Gamboa and by June of 1936, the transfer of the Dredging Division was completed along with the moving of 1,419 employees and family members. By June 1938 this number had increased to 2,132 reaching a peak of 3,853 in 1942. The "Silver Roll" employees, also called "Local Rate Employees", and their families were settled just north of Gamboa in a separate area which came to be known as Santa Cruz in 1948.

By 1953 Gamboa had five churches and Yacht Club, but the big Clubhouse was closed and Henry Grieser, famed swimming coach, no longer supervised the human tadpoles at the pool. But the people at Gamboa still like it. They like the wide streets, they think the stars shine



LEFT: The Gamboa Police Station in 1936. RIGHT: The Gamboa Swimming Pool with the Clubhouse on the left and the movie theater on the right, Circa late 1940s. Photos by czimages.

brighter at night, breezes blow cooler and their grass is greener. Confirmed Gamboans agree with their doctor, Albert Blanshaft, who said: "It's the best town on the Isthmus."

John G. Claybourn's dream had come true.